



# National Recreation and Park Association

## The No Child Left Inside Act

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### Background

On January 8, 2002, the President signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which commonly came to be called “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). This Act requires states to develop and implement testing measures to assess student performance. More specifically, NCLB links the allocation of federal dollars for education to specific performance goals holding schools across the country accountable for academic improvement based on standardized tests which measure reading and math scores.

Because funding is tied primarily to math and reading test scores, the preponderance of instruction at elementary and secondary schools across the nation now focuses on these two subjects. This has produced an unintended loss of instruction time in a number of subjects, notably environmental education, as many schools have been forced to scale back or eliminate environmental education in an effort to devote more time and resources to preparing students to improving reading and math.

### The Need for Environmental Education

As issues such as climate change and the impacts of pollution on our environment become more prevalent, ensuring a sustainable environment for future generations has become increasingly important. Unfortunately, many children have become isolated from exploring nature and understanding their environment. Increased time spent playing video games and watching television all contribute to this isolation. The result is that many children are not educated about their environment and do not grasp the responsibility they have to become stewards of their environment as they grow to adulthood. To meet this challenge and prepare such stewards, we must ensure that environmental education is infused in our nation’s elementary and secondary education curricula.

Environmental education is much more than simply studying various plant or animal species. Daily decisions in the use of energy, resources, and transportation, such as turning lights off when leaving a room, deciding whether to recycle, or deciding to use public transportation in place of driving, all have a significant impact on our environment. Environmental education prepares students to make such decisions wisely by helping them to understand the relationship between human behavior and environmental quality. With this understanding we are able to draw correlations between ecology and community planning which allow us to meet social and economic needs while preserving natural resources.

Additionally, the inclusion of environmental education does much to help schools meet the goals of NCLB while also preparing our students to enter the workforce and equipping our nation to compete in the global economy. A key component of NCLB is for all students to attain proficiency or better in reading and math by 2013-2014. A 1998 study conducted by the State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER), entitled *Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning*, found that “when integrated into the core curricula or used as an integrating theme across the curriculum, environmental education has a measurably positive impact not only on student achievement in science, but also in reading, math, and social studies.” The study determined that environmental education significantly enhances students’ critical thinking skills which, in turn, leads to higher achievement in various subjects.

In January, 2005, The American Institutes for Research conducted its own study which further corroborated the findings by SEER regarding the benefits of environmental education. The study entitled “*Effects of Outdoor Education Programs For Children In California*” involved sixth grade students from at-risk populations at four California elementary schools. The purpose of the test was to determine the impact outdoor education has on students. As such, students were divided into two groups; one which was exposed to environmental science through outdoor hands-on activities, and the second group which was not given exposure to outdoor learning experiences. The study concluded a significant number of positive outcomes are associated with student participation in outdoor educational programs. including higher ratings of conflict resolution, problem solving, and motivation to learn.

Clearly there is a demonstrated and compelling need for environmental education to be part of our nations elementary and secondary education curricula.

### **The No Child Left Inside Act of 2007**

In the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, innovative legislation has been introduced in the House (HR 3036) and the Senate (S.1981) to provide incentives to states to encourage schools and schools systems to include environmental science in their curricula. This legislation, known as the No Child Left Inside Act (NCLI), contains no new federal mandates nor testing requirements. States would not be required to participate. The Act does, however, provide incentives to state educational agencies through the creation of environmental education grants. Under this Act, public park and recreation agencies and other governmental entities would be authorized to partners with state educational agencies to carry out the grant requirements. Specifically, the Act would amend NCLB by:

- Allowing states to develop Environmental Literacy Plans: NCLI would provide federal funds to states for the development and implementation of statewide plans to ensure elementary and secondary school students are environmentally literate. Such plans would be required to be approved by the U.S. Department of Education.
- Enhancing Education through Environmental Education: States would be eligible to create an environmental grant program for teacher professional development and

student programs (modeled on the Math/Science Partnership in Title II of NCLB). Such programs would include outdoor learning experiences.

- **Building State and National Capacity:** Creating an environmental education grant program to help build national capacity by providing funds for the development, improvement and advancement of environmental education. This grant program would support the dissemination of proven environmental education models, studies of national significance, and the development of new state or national financing sources for environmental education.
- **Encouragement of Outdoor Experiences and Field-based Learning:** The Act specifically encourages participating schools and school systems to “Provide field experiences as part of the regular school curriculum and create programs that contribute to healthy lifestyles through outdoor recreation and sound nutrition.”

### **NRPA Supports Passage of No Child Left Inside**

It is likely that passage of the No Child Left Inside Act would occur within the context of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (NCLB). The reauthorization of NCLB presents a prime opportunity to make changes to that Act that will strengthen the legislation to achieve better learning outcomes by students and to better prepare students for real-world challenges and careers.

NRPA supports passage of the NCLI Act, and requests that Congress provide schools and school systems with the incentives, flexibility and authority to incorporate environmental education in their curricula through the inclusion of the NCLI legislation, as presented in HR 3036 and S. 1981, into the final NCLB reauthorization package.